

# Have yourself a real good Anthropocene; With her new book, Diane Ackerman installs herself as the poet laureate of the eco-optimists

The Toronto Star  
October 5, 2014 Sunday

Copyright 2014 Toronto Star Newspapers Limited

**Section:** INSIGHT; Pg. IN1

**Length:** 1569 words

**Byline:** Kate Allen Science Toronto Star

## Body

---

How would you feel if you killed your mother? Pretty bad, probably.

Humanity - the whole whack of us - is suffering from wide-scale psychological trauma of a similar kind, Diane Ackerman believes.

"I think maybe we're walking around with a sort of mass depression about what we are doing. We refer to the planet as female: Mother Earth. Mother Nature. OK, now we're being told that we are killing our mother, our mother is going to die, and it is our fault."

Ackerman, the bestselling author, poet and naturalist, has just the fix: her new book *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us*, a lyrically wrought romp through some of the innovative solutions, adaptations and modifications our species has created for our broken planet and our increasingly hot and uncomfortable place in it.

If you buy Ackerman's diagnosis of collective malaise, this book is a balm. From green roofs to aquaculture, the spirit of *The Human Age* is clear: if we embrace our capacity for creativity, we might still be OK.

"We are going in the right direction. We know what to do. We just have to get motivated. And there is absolutely no way to do that if all that we are confronted with is doom and gloom," Ackerman says.

But there is one critical question Ackerman fails to answer, and I am not the first to ask it: Who is "we"?

Researchers have established a large body of literature showing how the harmful effects of a degraded planet are not shared equally. Poor people and under-developed countries are much more likely to suffer from climate change and other environmental ills, because they are more exposed and have fewer adaptive resources. This is a familiar fact. What is new? Increasingly, scientists are embracing the proposition that fixing the environment without addressing systemic inequality merely exacerbates both problems.

Ackerman is clearly aware of the former finding, though she gives it short shrift in her 300-plus-page book. She seems altogether oblivious of the latter imperative. Page by page, as she builds a sparkling future full of urban greenery, weather-buffering technology and health-promoting innovations, it becomes hard not to ask: Who gets to live in this world? More importantly, who doesn't?

Is Ackerman offering us medicine, or just a spoonful of sugar?

Her title, *The Human Age*, is a reference to the term Anthropocene, a word used to describe the current geological epoch, one deeply inscribed by us. Officially, we live in the Holocene. But scientists have convincingly argued that

Have yourself a real good Anthropocene; With her new book, Diane Ackerman installs herself as the poet laureate of the eco-optimists

Homo sapiens has indelibly altered so much of the Earth, from its atmosphere to its waters and terrestrial surface, that this epoch should be named after us, its most dominant force.

Ackerman's book arrives at a messy time for the Anthropocene - the linguistic term, that is. The word was popularized by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, who used it in a context of frustration. Yet recently, as Australian ethicist and intellectual Clive Hamilton argued in Scientific American in June, "eco-pragmatists" have seized the term and begun to redefine "Anthropocene" as a period not of destruction but merely of change. So far, the Anthropocene has been characterized by human technology's alteration of the planet, but that same spirit of innovation can be put to service in the creation of a "good Anthropocene."

"They do not deny global warming; instead they skate over the top of it, insisting that whatever limits and tipping points the Earth system might throw up, human technology and ingenuity will transcend them," Hamilton wrote.

Hamilton is an eco-pragmatic antagonist. Many scientists and writers tagged with the "eco-pragmatist" label wouldn't call the Anthropocene good. They seek to acknowledge that the imprint of Homo sapiens is so deep that in many circumstances we have no choice but to work with and around human impacts, rather than try to reverse them.

Yet to non-scientists, even to some scientists, the divide can seem an issue of temperament. People like Hamilton, and the many other ecologists appalled by the idea of a "good Anthropocene" believe that things are very bad, and the only way to get better is to look disaster squarely in its face. They are pessimists, while the pragmatists are optimists. (Both camps would probably define themselves as realists.)

With Human Age, Ackerman has firmly installed herself as the poet laureate of the optimist camp.

"I'm glad there are doom and gloom people out there," she tells the Star while in Toronto to promote her book. "That's never been my strategy. I've always found it more effective to celebrate the life forms on the planet."

In the book, Ackerman trips from one marvel of human ingenuity to the next. She talks to Swedish engineers using the body heat generated by commuters in Stockholm's Central Station to warm a nearby office building. She climbs aboard the boat of a "mariculturist" in Connecticut raising kelp, oysters, scallops and clams in a sustainable vertical column. She spends most of her time in the developed world but also takes us to northwestern Bangladesh, where flood-beset families are serviced by solar-powered boats - floating school, library and health clinics - the invention of a Bangladeshi architect and climate change activist.

Most of Ackerman's examples are indeed marvellous, worthy of recognition. The problem is one of scope, of context. The Bangladeshi boat story comes on the heels of four other technological feats of protection against rising seas and worsening storms: London's Thames Barrier, Netherland's Maeslantkering dam system, Venice's steel-gated MOSE project, and Texas's "Ike Dike," the longest seawall in America.

Flitting through these in succession, Ackerman doesn't think it is worth mentioning that the western-world sea barriers are expensive projects to protect citizens from floods. The Bangladeshis - wonderful as their own boat project is - have never had that luxury.

Dams are often a potent example of who is chosen for protection and who is not. Petra Tschakert, a geography professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent years in northeast India, researching the riverside villages in the Himalayan foothills where deforestation has led to worsening monsoon floods.

Tschakert found two better-off, politically connected communities that were able to build partial embankments to protect themselves. In another community, of recent migrants of a different ethnicity and no political pull, floods are continual.

Have yourself a real good Anthropocene; With her new book, Diane Ackerman installs herself as the poet laureate of the eco-optimists

"Any effort to reduce negative impacts of climate change that are rooted exclusively in economic or technical solutions will not be successful, or will be highly unfair, because they do not tackle these underlying inequalities, and do not build capacities among those who are most affected," says Tschakert.

She was lead author of the "Livelihoods and Poverty" chapter in the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), explicitly mandated to address marginalized groups - a first, Tschakert says.

The exclusivity of Ackerman's techno-utopian future is most glaring in her chapters on urban reconciliation, projects that interweave man-made and wild landscapes. She writes about Manhattan's High Line linear park, two fine-dining undersea restaurants and a series of "living walls" (vertical gardens). She visits a living-wall pioneer in his Paris home, filled with plants and birds. One room sits atop a 5,000-gallon fish aquarium, visible through the plate-glass floor.

Good grief. Sometimes, optimism about the Anthropocene doesn't seem like the result of temperament. It seems like the result of privilege, an outlook afforded to those who live in bubbles where adaptive resources - money, mostly - is plentiful. In those bubbles, where Parisian eco-homes delight and fresh air is just a trip to Muskoka away, things can indeed look like they are getting better.

The eco-pragmatism debate often skirts the issue of privilege, and Hamilton didn't bring it up in his Scientific American piece. But he did address it in an essay posted on his blog, a response to a talk by environmental writer Andrew Revkin called "Charting paths to a 'good' Anthropocene."

"Personally, when I think about those toiling, vulnerable masses who are going to suffer the worst consequences of a warming world, I find it offensive to hear a comfortable, white American say, 'We are going to do OK.' I'm sorry if this seems harsh, but unless the IPCC has it completely wrong, much of the world's population is not included in your 'we.'"

In a New York Times Book Review piece on *The Human Age*, Rob Nixon, the author of a book about environment and poverty, praised the book's ambition but also wanted to know who Ackerman's "we" is.

"A technology's emergence is no guarantee that its benefits will trickle down to humanity at large," he wrote.

I asked Ackerman in two different ways how her book would be different if she were someone other than a white, comfortable American. She rejected the question both times, saying it was impossible to answer.

Part of the beauty of *The Human Age* - it is beautifully written - are Ackerman's descriptions of blended environments, where natural and man-made bleed together, and the kinship between humans and apes is clear. Ackerman sees spectrums rather than black and white. Kudos to that.

Yet we know one sharp line divides the world, and it is growing worse: the yawning gap between the rich and the poor.

**Load-Date:** October 5, 2014